

What If? (Part 6 of 6 in series, *Fearless*)

Matthew 21:1-11, Lamentations 3:19-26

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When I was growing up, my friends and I liked to play this game called, “What if?” The rules were simple: we took turns imagining unlikely scenarios, and posing them to the group as a question. But there was an unwritten rule that we never offered positive, happy scenarios. It wasn’t, “What if my mom was a millionaire?” or “What if we won the state soccer tournament?” We always imagined scenarios that freaked us out. This was especially compelling when the surroundings were just right: the wee hours of the morning, say, or any time our parents weren’t home after dark. If we were camping or otherwise out of doors, it raised the bar a bit, too. So we could say things like, “What if that noise in the woods is a rabid dog that eats only young girls?” Or inside, “What if that scratching on the window isn’t a tree branch your dad needs to trim, but is actually an ax murderer whittling away at the glass with his pocket knife little by little until it gives way so he can get inside?” Helpful, positive things like that.

Somehow, when we got older, we didn’t really feel the need to play that game anymore. Maybe it was because, as children, we had to make up things to be afraid of, and when we grew up a little, there were plenty of fearful things all around. Making things up then just seemed redundant. I mean, as children our fears were real, but I think we still knew they were small: we were afraid someone wouldn’t ask us to the homecoming dance, or that we would miss the winning shot in the basketball game. No one feared that they would lose a best friend in a car accident, or that a mom would get cancer. We didn’t know enough yet to fear those things.

But all of *us* do, don’t we? And if we let all those things, all those possibilities, take up residence in our minds, it can be absolutely paralyzing. Just this weekend, Steven and I, for the first time, mentioned that we’d like to lock up our daughter: we are still overwhelmed by the news that an 8-year-old girl was taken from her elementary school playground about 4 miles from here, and returned home only after experiencing horrible trauma. “Is nothing sacred?” we ask. “Are none of us safe?” Awful things could be right around the corner: what if there’s an accident, you find a lump, the house turns out to be full of mold, your car is stolen, your partner’s been unfaithful, you lose your job, war takes another life? It would be easy to live every day absolutely terrified of all these things. We don’t know what’s going to happen next, and while our “what if” *might* be a welcome surprise, we are more likely to dwell in the mindset that what comes next might be the overwhelming challenge that we don’t think we can withstand.

Yesterday morning, Caroline and I were watching some Saturday morning cartoons. And after Sid the Science Kid, Thomas the Train came on and at one point I heard one character say to another, “I’m sorry – I was trying to surprise you. I thought you would like it.” And the other character responded, “I just don’t like surprises.” For some reason, this little exchange stuck in my head, and I thought about it throughout the day. I wondered if the cartoon was supposed to have a moral, because if it was, I could only imagine it was something like, “Don’t surprise people because they might not like it.”

But how sad is that? How many things do we miss out on if we guard ourselves from *all* surprises to avoid the unpleasant ones? How often do we close ourselves off from the beauty of something new because we’re afraid of change and we aren’t willing to give up control over what we already have?

I can't help but think about the disciples, as we get ever so closer to Easter – or more particularly, to Good Friday. They've been jockeying for position, arguing over who's the greatest, ready for the restoration of Israel. They think that Palm Sunday is Jesus leading the parade to freedom. They wave their palms in assurance that he *is* the Christ, and as such, he'll be victorious – not over death, but over the Romans. They trust that no matter what happens, they're with Jesus, so they will be hailed, too. They have no idea what's coming up ahead.

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, scholars of biblical archaeology, have put together a narrative from extra-Biblical material that shows two competing parades at the same time: from the east comes Jesus, down from the Mount of Olives, riding on a donkey, in accordance with the prophecy from Zechariah. Jesus is accompanied by peasants, who have only their own cloaks and tree branches to carpet the way for this, their king, and they shout, "Hosanna," which means, "Save us!"¹

On the other side, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, approaches from the west, riding a warhorse and leading a long military march. While Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, Pilate proclaims the power of empire, and the two processions head toward a certain clash in the middle of the city. When they arrive, Matthew says "the whole city was stirred," but the Greek is that old familiar word that means "seismic," or "trembling." There are as many as 200,000 people there, 5 times the regular population. People ask, "Who is this?" And the crowds answer, without thinking, "It's Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Presumably they know the prophecy from Zechariah 9:

"Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey... He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." (Zechariah 9:9-10)

Presumably, the peasants walking with Jesus and waving their palms, those putting down their cloaks for Jesus to walk on, believe him to be the rightful king, the one who will overthrow Pilate and put Israel back on its own two feet. These crowds have come to see Jesus, to experience his powerful presence, to hear his compelling message, to feel his complete and boundless love, and to be subject to his healing power. They come to brag, smiling, "I was there when Jesus came into Jerusalem. I was there when it all happened. I saw it with my own eyes." The sense of anticipation for the disciples must have been palpable as they flanked Jesus' donkey, leading the parade.

And yet, for we who know the story, ominous music has started playing in the background and our hearts are beating a little faster as we wait for the ball to drop in Jerusalem. We're bracing for it: that's what this week is, right, and all of Lent to an extent? We're bracing for the poignancy of the crucifixion and the mourning that follows. We're bracing for whatever pain or struggle may be just around the corner in our own lives and the emotional turmoil that accompanies it, because we are afraid that whatever change is coming ahead might be *too hard*. It might be *too much* for us, for our weak faith and our tired bones and our frazzled emotions. We don't like surprises, because how will we manage if our "what if's" really come true?

As the disciples walked into Jerusalem, into a scene more horrific than they could have imagined in any game, with laughing hearts and shouting voices and waving palms, they walked with Jesus. They walked with him into the city, where he died a criminal's death, and they walked

¹ The two parade theory is quoted by John Rollefson, "Matthew 21:1-11 – Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, vol 2*, p. 153.

alone for two days. But then he was resurrected, and when they left the city a few days later, they walked with Jesus again, as he taught them all about the Scriptures and became present to him in the breaking of the bread. For two days, they were alone – he was in the grave. *But ever since then, Jesus has walked with us, too.*

And that memory, that story, is our hope. Though we know that challenges are ahead – challenges greater than we can even imagine, the assurance of Christ's presence with us—and not some Christ that is light years away but one who has experienced the ultimate in pain and struggle himself and has come through it, defeating even death—that Christ is present with us, and that Christ tells us not to fear.

In the reading we heard this morning from Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah is in the worst kind of shape. The city, Jerusalem, is under siege by the Babylonians. The very center of religious life has been shaken. The priests have been humiliated. Children are starving in the street with their parents lying slaughtered on the ground. Jeremiah spends three chapters in Lamentations telling us just how horrible it all is: that the city weeps all night long with no one to comfort her, the enemies have invaded even the most sacred spaces, the people are hungry, even Jeremiah's body is failing. He sees no possibility of escape from this misery.

And then, in chapter 3 verse 21, out of the blue, he remembers – he calls to mind the stories of God's faithfulness from the beginning of time, and in the midst of this lament, he says,

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’”

In the midst of the worst possible “what if,” the worst possible calamity, Jeremiah remembers God's faithfulness, and says, “*But, this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. I. have. hope.*”

We are entering the toughest week of the Christian year, where we walk this journey to Jerusalem with Christ. On Thursday we enter the upper room and abandon him in the garden, and on Friday we remember his cruel death on our behalf. But through it all, and through all the calamities and surprises and unwelcome changes of life, we have this hope: that we know the stories of God's faithfulness and can claim them as our own. We know that on Sunday, Christ walks with us out of Jerusalem, and into the world, and will walk with us forever, through any and every storm. And *there* is our hope, my friends. Christ is even here, saying, “Do not be afraid.”